

Supporting Survivors living with HIV

According to the National Network to End Domestic Violence, 55% of women and 20% of men living with HIV have experienced domestic violence. Victim-survivors of domestic violence are also 48% more likely to be exposed to HIV.

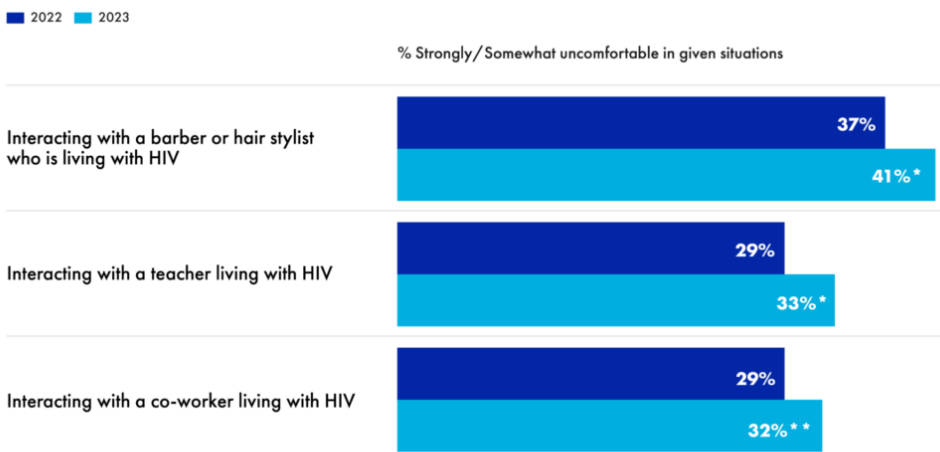


Stigma remains a significant barrier in the fight against HIV. In this day and age where antiretroviral therapy (ART) offers people living with HIV the chance at a healthy life, stigma can be even more dangerous than the virus itself. Despite major medical breakthroughs, outdated prejudices and misconceptions persist, bringing harm to those living with HIV and hindering efforts to stop the spread. For all of these reasons it is especially important that advocates understand the concept of U=U (undetectable = untransmittable) to keep from perpetuating deadly stereotypes and misinformation.

Modern ART can reduce a person’s viral load to undetectable levels, meaning that the amount of HIV in a person’s blood is so low, it cannot be detected by standard tests. According to the CDC, most people can achieve undetectable status within six months of starting treatment. **People with undetectable viral levels cannot transmit HIV to their sexual partners**, hence the phrase “U=U.”

This medical advancement is a massive win for victim-survivors who may feel like their HIV status has robbed them of opportunities for healthy relationships. Sexually transmitted infections can have a devastating blow to a person’s self-esteem. When a HIV-positive person knows that they can truly live a healthy life without putting others at risk, it can be empowering.

U=U is unfortunately not common knowledge among the general public causing the stigma against people with HIV to persist and, even increase. The 2023 GLAAD State of HIV Stigma Report reveals that 41% of people surveyed in 2023 are uncomfortable interacting with a hairstylist who is living with HIV, compared to 37% of those surveyed in 2022. Similarly, 32% of those surveyed in 2023 report being



*Statistically significant at 95% confidence. **Statistically significant at 90% confidence.

uncomfortable interacting with a coworker living with HIV compared to 29% surveyed in 2022. Stigma is dangerous, as it can prevent people from getting tested out of fear of the results, and discourages people living with HIV from seeking treatment.

As advocates, we must be educated in all matters that can affect a victim-survivor's life. Supporting people living with HIV goes beyond medical treatment, and requires addressing the social and emotional aspects of living with the virus. Here are some ways to support victim-survivors living with HIV:

1. Start by Believing.

- If a person with HIV discloses their status to you, or any abuse they have experienced, believe them.
- A simple "thank you for trusting me with this information" can go a long way to help a person feel safe and supported.

2. Avoid using stigmatizing language.

- Do not use words like "clean" to describe someone without sexually transmitted infections, as it implies someone with HIV or other diseases is dirty.
- Do not assume that a person with HIV is unsafe or careless.
- Focus on treatment options and protective measures.

3. Educate yourself.

- Understanding HIV, its transmission, and treatment can help dispel myths and reduce stigma. Remember: undetectable = untransmittable. People with undetectable viral loads cannot sexually transmit the virus.
- Research local programs and organizations which provide resources and treatment to people living with HIV. Access to programs such as Ryan White can help individuals become and stay undetectable and healthy. In some cases, other financial services may be available to the person living with HIV.

Defining and developing healthy relationships can be difficult for victim-survivors. Having HIV adds an extra layer of stigma and fear to their trauma. Abusers may even use a victim-survivor's status as means to control and manipulate them. Empowering a victim-survivor with HIV through education, support, compassion, and advocacy can help keep them safe. Community support is critical in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Encouraging open conversations about HIV in your community can help reduce stigma and encourage people to seek testing and treatment. By fostering empathy and educating ourselves and each other, we can provide a safer environment for victim-survivors living with HIV, combat HIV stigma, and work towards ending the HIV epidemic once and for all.

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